

WETLANDS ENHANCEMENT PROJECT – A MODEL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

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“It’s because of the eyes” Mary told me. “When I saw the seagulls peck their eyes out, it made me cry.”

Mary’s tears fell for the thousands of salmon stranded at the mouth of the Salmon River – stranded because dredging changed the mouth of the river, not once, but twice. As the salmon became lost migrating into shallow dead-end channels, they became easy pickings for the opportunist gulls.

But Mary Thomas of the Neskonlith band did more than just cry.

“When the townspeople changed the course of the river, I lost half my meadow.” Said Mary. “But the fish and the birds lost more. They lost the food, the resting places and the homes that they have been using for thousands of years. I had to do something.”

You see, Mary owns the land on Shuswap Lake at the mouth of the river. Over the years, dredging and over grazing by cattle have dramatically altered the nature of the wetlands located here. In fact, they almost disappeared. And, as the wetlands receded, salmon and wildlife populations diminished, some to dangerously low levels.

Spearheaded by Mary, “cooperation” became the flavor of the day. She petitioned politicians, environmental groups, Neskonlith and Adams Lake band members, even provincial and federal government officials, until she got results.

Thanks to the combined efforts of Environment Canada, the Ministry of the Environment, Lands and Parks, both native bands, Ducks Unlimited, several other partners (and Mary, of course) the Salmon Arm Indian Lands Project has been heralded a tremendous success.

The project took three years of planning and on-site work to complete. The Canadian Wildlife Service, through the Fraser River Action Plan, contributed funding towards protecting the remaining marsh and estuary. Two dikes, a juvenile fish exclusion screen, nest boxes, and several loafing logs are only a few of the improvements that have been made to enhance the wetlands habitat.

“The most important things we had to do on this site was to manage the cattle,” said Rick McKelvery, Head of Waterfowl and Habitat Management for the Canadian Wildlife Service. “We

put up almost three kilometers of smooth-wire fencing to keep the cattle from grazing down the cottonwood saplings and the various marsh grasses and bulrushes that grow there.”

“In fact, when we did a walkabout recently, we were excited to see that the cottonwood saplings are already more than two meters high – and that in one year.”

Ian Barnett, District Manager for Ducks Unlimited in Kamloops agrees with Rick McKelvey that cattails and bullrushes are an important component of the project. “Western grebes use this area. It is one of only two remaining areas in British Columbia where western grebes breed and raise young. The grebes anchor their nests to the red canary grass. If we lose this wetland we may well lose one of the last two gene pools of western grebes. We can’t afford that.”

The District of Salmon Arm recognizes the high natural value of Salmon Arm Bay and has adopted the western grebe as its official bird. Salmon Arm officials hope that protected wetlands will increase grebe numbers. A spin-off benefit will be that bird and wildlife viewers visiting the wetlands will bring tourism dollars to the region.

But the wetlands do more than bring in tourism revenue and protect the western grebe. They also protect people. “Wetlands help prevent flooding and erosion. They alleviate droughts and help recharge water tables.” said Gail Moyle with the Fraser River Action Plan. “They also act like environmental kidneys in that they can filter pollutants and toxic contaminants. That’s why it is so important to protect them.”

And that is exactly what Mary Thomas set out to do – and, indeed, has accomplished. She wants the wetlands to go back to what they were like when she was young. “I used to go down there and the trees were everywhere. Now there are only a few patches. If there is one thing I want to do, it is to save what is left. Protecting something this important is not a racial thing. If enough people get together as “people” we can go far together. THAT is the message I give.”

I guess enough people have heard, and acted on, Mary’s message.

The story of the wetlands enhancement project at the mouth of the Salmon River is the stuff to make environmentalists jump with joy. It stands as a triumphant milestone in the battle to preserve what is left of nature. It also gives tribute to a lady with a simple idea and an overwhelming sense of responsibility – a lady who would not take “no” for an answer.

For information on other Fraser River Action Plan initiative in the Salmon Arm area, please call: (604) 6665-5900.